Students Skip School Across Europe to Demand Climate Action

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Highlight: In cities including Berlin, London and Paris, young protesters took to the streets to urge their leaders to combat climate change.

Body

Thousands of students streamed out of schools across Europe on Friday, waving placards and carrying banners as they marched as part of a coordinated walkout to demand action on climate change.

In London, students chanting, “Save our planet!” gathered in Parliament Square, where they brought traffic to a standstill. Others held signs that read, “ Change the politics not the climate.”

About 200 students gathered outside the Ministry of Ecology in Paris, saying they hoped to repeat the demonstration every week until their demands were heard. They urged the government to reduce France’s greenhouse gas emissions by at least 4 percent per year.

Similar demonstrations have been steadily gaining momentum since emerging in Sweden last year. Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old activist, has been cutting class weekly since September to stage sit-ins at the Swedish Parliament demanding government action to address climate change.

Inspired by her, a movement known as Youth Strike 4 Climate was founded in Britain and has since grown rapidly, propelled by social media. Demonstrations have been held in Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland and elsewhere.

[Read more on the background of the student climate protests here.]

Luisa Neubauer, 22, one of the organizers of marches in Berlin, which have gone on for weeks, called Friday’s demonstrations powerful. Children as young as 6 joined university students on the streets, she said.

“It’s just during these strikes that I am convinced we can actually make a difference,” she said.

While some politicians have rallied in support of the students, others, including Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain, have been skeptical.

A spokesman for Mrs. May said: “Everybody wants young people to be engaged in the issues that affect them most so that we can build a brighter future for all of us. But it is important to emphasize that disruption increases teachers’ workloads and wastes lesson time that teachers have carefully prepared for.”

The prime minister’s reaction was criticized by some, including Ms. Thunberg, the Swedish teenager.

“British PM says that the children on school strike are ‘wasting lesson time.’ That may well be the case,” Ms. Thunberg wrote on Twitter. “But then again, political leaders have wasted 30 yrs of inaction. And that is slightly worse.”

Follow Megan Specia on Twitter: @meganspecia. Juliette Hirsch contributed reporting.

PHOTO: Demonstrators gathered Friday in Brighton, southern England. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Dan Kitwood/Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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